Death of a DA

Jim Garrison: Tried to prove plot to kill JFK

By Michael Dorman

Flamboyant former prosecutor Jim Garrison — reviled by some as a charlatan, lionized by others as nurturer of the flame of truth in the John F. Kennedy assassination — died yesterday at his New Orleans home.

He was a month short of 71, and he died as he had lived — with a hint of mystery. Although it was known he had been ill for months, the nature of the illness was not disclosed.

But longtime friend and coroner Dr. Frank Minyard said Garrison died of natural causes.

Garrison was a big man, 6-foot-7 inches tall, weighing well more than 200 pounds, and was nicknamed "the Jolly Green Giant." He had a booming voice and an ego as big as Louisiana. He served 12 years as the New Orleans district attorney and later served another 12 years as a judge of Louisiana's Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals before he retired in 1991.

He returned to the public limelight late last year with the release of Oliver Stone's movie, "JFK," in which Kevin Costner played Garrison in what many contended was a fanciful account of attempts to prove a conspiracy was responsible for Kennedy's assassination. The movie was based in part on Garrison's book, "On the Trail of the Assassins," describing his investigation of the Kennedy case. The movie ironically cast Garrison himself in the role of the late Chief Justice Earl Warren, whose investigating commission found no evidence of a conspiracy in the assassination.

Garrison began investigating the assassination shortly after Kennedy was shot to death Nov. 22, 1963. All he had at the outset was a native suspicion and information that Lee Harvey Oswald, Kennedy's presumed killer, had spent the previous summer in New Orleans. He assembled a bizarre aggregation of witnesses in an attempt to prove that a New Orleans business executive named Clay Shaw had taken part in an assassination conspiracy.

When Shaw came to trial on what many argued were trumped-up charges, one of these witnesses showed up at the courtroom wearing a toga. Asked to

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AP Photo

Jim Garrison

Jim Garrison; Probed JFK Conspiracy

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identify himself, he said: "Julius Caesar." Another witness, a psychiatrist, testified he fingerprinted his daughter each time she came home from school — to be sure a spy hadn't assumed her identity. A third witness claimed he was the victim of some sort of communist conspiracy. He testified that at least 50 to 60 people had hypnoptized him against his will. Asked how he knew he was being hypnotized, he replied: "When someone tries to get your attention — get your eye — that's a clue right off."

Garrison could never seem to decide who was behind the assassination — blaming everyone from Cuban exiles to right-wing Minutemen to "the invisible Nazi sub[illegible]re." Nor could he decide how many conspirat[illegible] taken part in the plot. By one of his accounts, no fewer than 18 people were involved. Nor could he settle on one story describing the source of the fatal bullets.

The jury in Clay Shaw's case, after 34 days of testimony, took less than an hour to find him not guilty. The next day, Garrison filed a new charge — perjury — against Shaw. But a federal appeals court threw out the charge, accusing Garrison of intentionally using the arrest of Shaw "for his own purposes, with complete disregard for the rights of Clay Shaw."

The court said Garrison had "a significant financial interest in the continued prosecution of Clay Shaw" — since he had written another book, "Heritage of Stone," about the case and held a contract for three additional books.

Until his death, Garrison continued arguing vehemently that there had been a conspiracy. And, for every critic who called him a fraud, there were many more assassination buffs who lauded him as a hero.

This hero-worship survived further setbacks in Garrison's career. In 1973, while serving his third term as DA, Garrison was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of taking bribes to protect gambling interests in rollicking New Orleans. He beat the charge, but the effort left him little time to campaign and he was defeated at the polls. Next, he ran for the Louisiana Supreme Court but again was defeated.

In 1978, he was elected to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. He stepped down from the bench last year when he reached the mandatory retirement age of 70.

New Orleans District Attorney Harry Connick Sr., who unseated Garrison in 1973, yesterday said: "It was a very sad day, I think, when he [Garrison] focused on Clay Shaw because that indictment and prosecution was totally unfounded."

But Frank Mankiewicz, a spokesman for Stone and a political aide to Robert Kennedy, said Garrison's investigation was important.

"Every American owes him [Garrison] a debt of gratitude. He kicked open a door that had been closed too long," said Mankiewicz, now of the Hill & Knowlton public relations firm. Stone was in Thailand and unavailable for comment, Mankiewicz added.

"Anybody who knows anything about this story realizes Jim Garrison was the only public official to try to bring legal action in the case of the assassination of President Kennedy," said Jim Marrs, author of the book "Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy."

Garrison was a native of Dennison, Iowa, and a graduate of Tulane University and its law school. At one time, his ranch-style house echoed with the bustling sounds of a wife, Leah, and five children.

But by last year, he was left with with no one to share his reborn fame. His wife was gone. His children were gone. Most of the furniture was gone. The house was almost empty. Jim Garrison was alone.

At the time of his death, the family reassembled at his bedside.

Garrison is survived by his wife, a sister, five children and one grandchild.

A funeral service is scheduled for tomorrow.

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